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ABSTRACT

The value of the grounded theory approach to inquiry for the study and practice of higher education is discussed. It is suggested that there is a need to identify approaches to inquiry that maintain scientific validity while revealing meaningful responses to the complex problems of higher education. An approach that may be employed for this purpose is Glaser and Strauss's constant comparative method, which is designed to inductively generate grounded theory (i.e., based on data obtained from the field). The current debate over the processes that may be used in conducting legitimate inquiry is briefly reviewed. It is claimed that most challenges facing higher education researchers and practitioners are so complex that they require knowledge unobtainable through the use of traditional scientific approaches. Benefits of the grounded theory approach, which is a qualitative method, are noted as follows: (1) it usually involves collaboration by researchers and practitioners in identifying strategies for dealing with complex problems; and (2) the investigators are involved in the social situation under study. It is suggested that in using this approach the investigator needs to account for the often subjective nature of the data. (SW)

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE VALUE OF GROUNDED
THEORY FOR THE STUDY
AND PRACTICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Before one embarks upon a journey, be it to Pittsburgh or into the depths of the sea, there are many decisions to be made and much preparation to be done. For to undertake a journey without an appropriate plan of action is to risk, at best, inconvenience -- at worst, failure to reach one's objective.

When the goal is to reach a known destination via familiar, oft-traveled and clearly marked routes, planning for and successfully completing the journey is usually simple. However, what if the desired destination requires the traveler to navigate unfamiliar, perhaps uncharted terrain? Assuming that the traveler has never made the particular journey before, how does she/he know that the routes described by previous travelers or those which appear on the oil company maps are the best -- or for that matter that they even exist?

Perhaps even more puzzling, what if the traveler is not even certain of the desired destination? What if one only knows that she/he wants to be "somewhere else"? How then does one plan for the journey which lies ahead?

Unfortunately, the challenges faced by scholars and practitioners in higher education are generally more akin to those of the traveler who simply knows that where she/he is leaves much to be desired. More often than not we in higher

education are faced with complex problems for which straightforward, simple solutions do not exist. We only know that we want to be "somewhere else" even though we cannot really say where or, for that matter, why.

Thus, in order to successfully unravel the complexities of everyday life in the academy, scholars and practitioners committed to finding solutions to the problems in the field must arm themselves with a repertoire of skills, techniques, competencies, and, most importantly, perspectives which will enable them at once to maintain flexibility and rigor in their approaches to problem solving. In a world composed of human systems and their accompanying values, perspectives, and motivations, the effective investigator must employ methodologies which allow the flexibility in data gathering and analysis necessary not only to identify and explain relationships among variables but also to understand the complex and dynamic context in which the phenomena being research^{ed} take place and the ways in which the human participants make meaning of their experiences. Just as the traveler over unfamiliar terrain is impacted by and must react to every unforeseen occurrence, so must the investigator in higher education be prepared to follow each new lead and overcome each new hurdle in seeking the answers to his/her particular questions.

The unfortunate reality is that in many cases, perhaps more than we would like to admit, researchers and practitioners alike find themselves ill-equipped to function effectively in the complex and dynamic world of higher education because they have been trained to approach problems as if they were simple journeys to be traveled toward known destinations. Consequently, the solutions often proposed to the challenges encountered can only be classified as "more of the same" -- solutions often based on untested, perhaps a priori, assumptions and arrived at via methodologies so rigid that they hardly allow for any other outcomes.

The critical challenge in the field thus becomes to identify approaches to inquiry which, while maintaining scientific validity, offer some hope of guiding meaningful action in response to complex problems. One such approach to meeting this challenge was originated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and is known as the constant comparative method. This approach is a specific form of qualitative, comparative analysis designed to inductively generate grounded theory -- theory which emerges from data systematically obtained in the field. The use of this method enables the researcher to develop theoretical propositions reflecting not only surface level behavioral relationships but, more importantly, indepth understandings of the phenomena under study.

The value of such an approach to the study of higher education seems apparent and, in fact, few openly disagree that an indepth understanding of a given situation is important if one is to generate knowledge about it. However, debate continues among scholars regarding not the desired ends; rather, the processes which may be used in conducting legitimate inquiry. Indeed, the debate over process stems from differences among scholars' perspectives as to what is and what is not legitimate science and it is this debate which often clouds the importance and value of research generated through all qualitative approaches. A brief review of this debate may be helpful.

Susman and Evered (1978) hold that the physical, biological, and social sciences have historically been dominated by a positivist conception of science and that because of this positivist orientation, the organizational literature (which many of us in higher education depend upon) is becoming less useful in solving the practical problems faced by participants in complex organizations. They use the term "positivist science" to describe all approaches to science that consider scientific knowledge to be obtainable only from sense data that can be directly experienced and verified between independent observers (p. 583). Susman and Evered explain that positivist approaches to science: 1) assume that their methods of inquiry are neutral -- free of human values and interests; 2) treat

persons as simple objects of inquiry -- ignoring that human beings have the capacity of contemplate and initiate action in their own right; 3) eliminate the role of history in the generation of knowledge -- treating individuals and organizations as if they are created intact; and 4) assume that a system is defined only to the extent that denotative language exists to describe it -- ignoring the role of human intuition, hunch, and interpretation (1978, pp. 585-86). Because of their rigid adherence to these assumptions and their accompanying rules for data collection and analysis, positivist approaches to scientific inquiry severely limit the freedom of the investigator to gain a true understanding of organizational phenomena and thus to generate knowledge which is useful to the organizational participants.

Vaill (1976), in lamenting the inadequacies of current thinking about organizational designs, voiced a similar concern about what he calls the "expository model of science" (p. 77). According to Vaill much of the scientific behavior in western culture is and has been based on a series of complex assumptions and perceptions which negate much of the potential usefulness of the products of scientific inquiry.

The primary function of the expository model of science is to expose and to explain nature. Unfortunately, according to Vaill, the processes by which knowledge is produced are independent of the researchers' "understandings" of a

given phenomenon, his/her values and intents, and the ways in which the researcher impacts the phenomenon under study. The result of scientists' adoption of the expository model has been that certain rigid procedural routines have become standardized and indeed adopted as the only acceptable methods of inquiry. These processes tend to be cold and mechanical and generally ignore the complexity of human nature. The expository model, in its quest for knowledge about which there can be certainty, demands an exactitude in methodology, verifiability, replicability, and disinterested observation, which fails to allow the scientist the freedom which is necessary to gain a true understanding of the complex nature of human beings. Thus, the products of the expository models of science often are not applicable to "real world" settings.

Susman, Evered, and Vaill describe perspectives on science and approaches to scientific inquiry which ignore the importance of the context in which the phenomena take place and its effect on the persons being studied. The results of these approaches to inquiry tend to oversimplify the causes of human behavior -- often depending wholly on quantifiable data and on predetermined grand theories which may or may not be applicable. Indeed, these models rob human beings of their very humanity by reducing them to the status of simple reactionary objects to be observed from afar. Because of this, much of the scientific research

produced by persons trained in the positivist and expository approaches to science, is increasingly being deemed inappropriate for use by those charged with managing complex systems.

In response to the limitations of traditional approaches to inquiry, several scholars have suggested that there are more useful ways to conduct research on human systems. These approaches which may be loosely categorized as qualitative methods are not meant to replace the logic of empiricism inherent in the traditional approaches described previously; rather, these approaches are aimed at gaining an understanding of the social world. Qualitative methods hold that the context in which social actors exist is of equal importance to observed behavior and essential in explaining the meaning of the behavior. This emphasis on an understanding of context requires that the researcher gain first hand, intimate knowledge of a given research setting in order to "tap the subjective world of feelings, attitudes, and personal orientations" (Engelbert, 1981; p. 9).

The historical and philosophical roots of the various qualitative methods can be traced to a variety of sociological perspectives, among them, socio-linguistics' symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and phenomenology (Parsons, 1978). According to Parsons, all of these

approaches to the study of society share two significant and interrelated insights:

"First, the everyday social actor does not merely internalize norms whose implementation is seemingly as automatic as the stimulus-response behavior sequences learned in operant conditioning....on the contrary the actor is a conscious agent continuously mindful of and responsible for the active application of normative codes in the interpretation of social reality. In this view, society is not the unfolding of pre-established behavior in (an assumed) highly stable environment of others and material objects but the creative production of interacting and interdependent agents who are skillful at interpretively understanding and communicating the sense of their own social worlds.

Second, these approaches point to the importance of interpretation not only in sociological inquiry...but in the particular social reality under study (1978; p. 111).

In other words, qualitative approaches to the study of society assume that the techniques of what Schutz called verstehen are not only used by sociologists in gaining an understanding of a given social action, but are inherent in the interpretation of reality by the social actor attempting to make meaning of his/her routine, everyday experiences (Parsons, 1978).

Thus, the charge to the investigator seeking to understand the nature of a given social phenomenon is not only to describe the methods of communication and patterns of

behavior which exist in a given setting but to go beyond these to identify the constitutive codes of interpretation used by social actors to make meaning of their social experiences (Parsons, 1978; p. 126). That is, in order to truly understand the social reality being experienced by the actors in a given setting, the investigator must be able to gain a sufficient grasp of the context in which the actors exist and the ways in which they interpret the events which comprise their daily lives. One must go beyond what subjects say and do and indeed must become intimately familiar with their world so that the insights gained and the theory subsequently produced is based not merely on behavioral observations and reflective interpretation, but on an indepth understanding of the world being experienced by those persons under study.

Thus, the debate continues. A debate among scholars and practitioners alike as to what are legitimate approaches to address important questions. Unfortunately, this debate has in a sense served only to divert attention from the substance of the everyday problems faced by those of us in the academy and has focused energies on questions of process. It is my contention, and I believe that of my colleagues, that both approaches, qualitative and the more traditional, have merit and that the charge to the investigator in higher education is to select that approach which will be most effective in accomplishing the desired ends.

In other words, to resurrect my metaphor, one's plan of action depends upon the nature of one's journey. However, I contend further that many, if not most of the challenges facing researchers and practitioners in those human systems known as institutions of higher education are so complex that they require knowledge simply unobtainable through the use of what might be considered traditional approaches to science. Given this contention, the value of the grounded theory approach, as well as other qualitative methods, increases immensely.

The primary benefits of approaches such as grounded theory become evident when one considers several of their basic characteristics. These approaches are generally collaborative, involving both the researcher and the practitioner in identifying strategies for dealing with complex problems. They are generally carried out within a mutually acceptable ethical framework for both the researcher and the participants, with values, intents, and purposes clearly stated from the beginning. They allow investigators, be they scholars or practitioners, the flexibility to become a part of the social situation under study. They produce results which while not always generalizable, may be transmittable in a common sense way to other settings. They allow the investigator to address realistic problems and situations which might not ordinarily be pursued. Finally, such approaches result in a more complete understanding of

the totality of a given situation rather than some smaller, perhaps less significant, aspect of it.

While these important benefits are of significant value, they do not come without costs, for to carry out research using methods such as the constant comparative method the researcher must immerse himself/herself in the situation under study in order to claim the intimate familiarity which is a necessary ingredient if a meaningful outcome is to be produced. However, by immersing oneself in a given situation one invariably impacts that situation and thus the data which is obtained. One is unable to claim the objectivity of disinterested observation. (Parenthetically, it can be argued convincingly that this claim is somewhat of a farce anyway as all researchers, no matter what their method, bring values, opinions, perspectives to their research.) Nevertheless, methods used in producing grounded theory carry with them an extraordinary responsibility on the part of the investigator to make certain that in reporting results, she/he accounts for the often subjective nature of the data.

Further, approaches such as those used to generate grounded theory are time-consuming and can be emotionally and psychologically trying on the researcher in that as one becomes a part of a given research situation one experiences the emotions inherent in the phenomena. The researcher

often finds it difficult to separate the role of the observer from that of the participant and both of these roles are impacted by the myriad of other occurrence happening in the researchers life at the time.

Finally, there are ethical challenges inherent in methods used to generate grounded theory as often the researcher has access to much more information and insight than the normal participant and will be called upon to serve as a consultant to others wishing to gain this information. The researcher must use extra caution in making certain that in his/her efforts to gain credibility she/he does not destroy the confidence so necessary for the successful completion of the research project.

Despite the costs involved in carrying out research of this nature, the potential for being able to identify effective solutions to meaningful and important problems far outweighs any potential challenges from those who would argue over form rather than function. The journeys each of us embark upon every day, journeys which often lead more away from one place than toward another, require that we adopt modes of transportation which allow us to negotiate land, sea, air, or space. The complexity of the academy guarantees the creation of complex problems for which innovative solutions must be identified. "More of the same" will no longer suffice. The grounded theory approach to inquiry is one mode which, if used properly,

holds great promise for the study and practice to higher education.

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